

Learning English

The Experience of the Onward Willow Project

BY SUSANNE CROUSE

L'auteure raconte les premières expériences au Canada de deux immigrantes d'ascendance Chinoise et comment le projet "Onward Willow," un organisme qui travaille avec les immigrantes afin de les aider à surmonter les obstacles qui les empêchent de participer pleinement à la vie canadienne, a influencé leur vie.

Immigration to a new country with a strange language and unfamiliar customs can be a frightening thing for a person. That person must learn a new language quickly or they become isolated and unable to perform the simplest of functions such as buying groceries, finding doctors, or reading street signs. Married immigrant women often have the added struggle of caring for children by themselves at home while their husbands have outside employment and become assimilated into the new country much quicker. The lack of understanding of the English language in North America can become as crippling as any physical or mental disability for immigrants of all ages. The isolation is increased without any friends or relatives with whom they can speak. Even if they learn to speak some English, the problems of dealing with written information and communicating to English-speaking people can be a real barrier and cause hardship in an immigrant's life.

Because of the growing awareness of the problems other than English-speaking immigrants face when moving to English-speaking countries, some places have begun to develop programs which attempt to reach out and break the isolation of the new residents. One place that has produced such a program is Onward

Willow: Better Beginnings, Better Futures. Onward Willow is one of eight primary prevention projects funded by the province of Ontario. The purpose of Onward Willow is to provide programs to impoverished and immigrant families with young children to prevent possible problems later in their children's lives. One of the successful services set up by the project has been the Family Visitor program. This program was set up to ensure that families with young children are not isolated in the community and that children are adequately cared for. A Family Visitor is a friend who connects with a specific family and helps the family to access services and resources in the community. For example, a Family Visitor would help a family with young children to find a family doctor, locate local schools and day cares, take them to stores and help them pick out nutritious meals, or help them understand business letters. A Family Visitor would encourage parents to spend time playing or reading with their children, or they could just be someone to talk to when parents feel alone. Because the Onward Willow has a high-density immigrant population speaking many languages, it was decided that some of the Family Visitors hired should be representative of the dominant immigrant groups in the neighbourhood. They work as a team with English-speaking Family Visitors. At the beginning of the project there were Family Visitors whose first language was Spanish or the Chinese language of Mandarin. Overtime the population has changed and the Family Visitors are now represented by women whose first lan-

guages are Vietnamese, or Pharsi and Uzbek—the official languages of Afghanistan.

The neighbourhood realized that children of all ages should be able to participate at the Family Gateway and Onward Willow, the two community centres that participate in the project. The neighbourhood community began raising money to offer the Onward Willow programs to school-aged children, teenagers, and adults. These programs were designed to recognize the cultural diversity of the neighbourhood and interpretation services were provided to increase the access of new Canadian families. In an effort to continue the outreach to the people of Chinese heritage the receptionist hired for the Family Gateway Centre speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English. Two women born in Canada and living in the Onward Willow community teach families from South East Asia how to speak English in an informal manner, once a week, as community volunteers.

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The Spanish community has progressed to the point where volunteers in the neighbourhood who speak, read, and write in both Spanish and English are able to offer a Spanish program once a week in the centre. In this way immigrant women are encouraged to break the cycle of isolation and join with others who

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are experiencing the same difficulties. Furthermore, they are able to mingle with English-speaking Canadians, fostering new friendships and practising their English.

The following stories are just two from the hundreds of people who have benefited from the programs offered at Onward Willow. Both women emigrated from China and begin their stories by describing how they felt and what they experienced when they first arrived in Canada. The women explain how the Family Visitor program, the informal English classes, the other programs, and the staff at Onward Willow have made a difference in their lives.

My name Yan Wang. I came to Canada from China in September 1997. Everything seemed new to me when I first arrived. It was foreign and very different from my own home country. After settling down for a few days I began to realize the difficulties with immigrating. The lan-

guage barrier was the main problem. I did not understand what people said. I dared not even step out of my house because I was afraid I would get lost and I did not know how to ask people for directions home. I could not go shopping. I felt like I was dumb, deaf, blind, and handicapped. Five days later, I was taken to work in a bakery in Toronto. Because I did not know English, I was looked down on. I suffered a lot from the supervisor's hot temper. I cannot even describe it thoroughly. I was as if I were a dog. I did not work there long.

I came to Family Gateway to learn my English in October 1997. I was touched when I was welcomed by the group and the teacher's hospitality. Since then, I have come to the group every week. I began to learn my English alphabet. It was very difficult for me to start learning because I did not know any of the English alphabet at all. My age, 51, is one of the problems. My memory has decreased and sometimes I can hardly remember what I have learned. The teachers have taught me with patience and hospitality. Whenever I did not understand, or if I forgot something, they reviewed and repeated the lesson. They are even more patient than the teachers in the kindergarten class. These are the two Canadian teachers, Betty Anne Mugford and Sam Zuber. They come to teach us every week on time, disregarding the reward. Their good behaviour as well as Ali Hoang's [the Family Gateway receptionist and translator for the group] is worth respect. Through the time studying with the teachers and the group, I have benefited a lot! I began to learn words for basic sentences in daily language. I do not feel as dumb as I felt before. Besides teaching us the language, the teachers have also helped the new immigrants, like me, to know and understand more about the environment in our area such as the parks, the two Onward Willow centres [Onward Willow and Family Gateway], the gym at the schools,

the clothing room in Onward Willow, and the health clinic at Family Gateway, etc. I received some emergency food and clothes which helped me overcome many difficulties.

In addition to studying English at the Family Gateway, I have made more friends and I now know my neighbours. My view has become wider through many activities. I find my life is much better than before. I am not afraid of going out like I was before. Now I can go shopping to buy food and clothes. I can go to the bank to deposit or to cash money for myself. As English is my second language, I dare not expect to learn English beyond a certain level. Besides, I am too old to learn. However, if my teachers are willing to teach, I will keep on studying. I will try to work harder on studying than the young people in order to catch up to my class. I hope I can speak some more English so that I can talk with the English-speaking people. I will be very satisfied if I am able to take the citizenship test in a few years. I feel that two hours a week is too short to learn English. I hope we can have more time to study so that I can master English as soon as possible.

My name is Niang Ye. I have lived in Guelph, Ontario for five years. Like many other immigrants, I entered a very strange world when I first stepped on this land five years ago from China. Since that day, I began to learn about this place and to adapt to this society. Also, since that day I have faced more challenges in my life. My lifestyle has changed totally. Culture shock, the changeable weather, and the language barrier were multiple challenges to a new immigrant like me who came without any English background.

First of all, the language barrier discouraged me from looking for a family doctor. My husband had come to Canada two years earlier than I. He could speak only a little English. He worked in a factory for an average income. I have no relatives or friends in Canada, and since I couldn't speak

English, I seldom went out. I would rather stay home all day than go out. When my husband went to work, I went to school to learn English. I was so nervous facing the many people in the class. I also felt ashamed to ask the teacher questions whenever I did not understand what the teacher taught. When the teacher asked me a question, I did not know how to answer. It was as if I were deaf and dumb in the class. I stayed silently until the class was over. Finally, I had to give up learning English at school.

When my first child was born, my stress increased. The weight on my shoulders seemed heavier. I was not only worried about myself, but also for the future of my child. I did not know how to take care of a child or how to teach my child. I did not know how to ask for help. When my husband went to work, I felt lonely and without hope. I had no where to go and no one to talk to.

Things changed in my life since I had a Family Visitor visit my house. First of all, she came to my house to interview me. She spoke the same language as I did as we had both emigrated from the same country. She had come to Canada three years earlier than I had and we quickly became friends. The Family Visitor introduced me to all the programs at the Family Gateway and Onward Willow and recommended which programs would be good for me. She usually told me some news about what was happening around our area. She told me how to take care of my babies in terms of nutrition, play, and their development. Sometimes, she helped me translate documents. She also introduced me to many friends who lived in our neighbourhood. My knowledge was growing and my life in Canada started then. The Family Visitor helped me in many different ways. She was the one person always available when I was in need. I began to feel the world around me was not as strange anymore because of the concern shown to me from many other people in the community. I no longer felt alone.

The Family Visitor asked me to join "Friends' Circle," which is a group of Chinese people who gather together to learn English with a translator. I loved joining them. I like this group very much. In such an informal English class with the friendly facilitators and translator, I felt more comfortable to practice and understand English quicker. I have learned daily conversation from this group.

In addition, I have also participated in many different activities and made a lot of new friends. I take my children to the Onward Willow and Family Gateway to join the children's play group program. I am glad that they are getting better day by day. I also have joined another program for parents, the "Parent Workshop." I found that it is relaxing and my creativity has been explored through working with various forms of art. Some of the parents speak the same language as me and some speak English.

Thanks to the Family Visitor we found a family doctor in Guelph. Whenever I needed to see the doctor, she would come and help me. My application for subsidized daycare and affordable housing was approved quickly because of the help from the Family Visitor Coordinator and the Family Visitor. I really appreciated their help.

Because of funding cuts and because the Family Visitor wanted to continue her profession, which she obtained in China, we no longer have a Family Visitor to come and visit us at home. My worries have increased with her leaving. We (my husband and I) have a lot of trouble with the language barrier. When we receive letters from the government or the bank, we do not know what the letters are about. We risked filling in some forms or cards without knowing the content thoroughly. That's why I got into trouble.

Once I received a letter from the government and I worried about what the letter said. I took it to the Family Gateway centre and asked for help. When I discovered the newly-hired

receptionist could speak my language, I was so happy. Thanks to the receptionist, I found out that the letter was regarding an almost 1,000 dollar fine for an overpayment of parental leave benefits which my husband applied for when our third child was born. It was as if I went through a thunderstorm. We did not know what was going on and what mistake we had made when filling out the cards. Thanks to the help from the Coordinator of the centre, the Family Visitor Coordinator, the Community Development Worker, and the receptionist's translation, we finally sorted out the cause of the problem. It was due to a misunderstanding of the English language and the system. They tried hard to advocate for my case and finally the fine was waived and we only had to return the overpayment. It was really stressful for us during that time. We finally have had a break and some relief since then. I am very grateful to them and appreciate their help.

Now I really feel that learning English is very important to my life. I still come to the "Friends' Circle" to learn English regularly. I hope I can pick up English as soon as I can so that I can be adept to the society without bothering others. I am thankful to the two English facilitators and the translator who have volunteered their time over the years to help us learn in an informal way. Now I can

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understand the daily conversation people use and I can talk with others in English, although with some difficulties. I am very grateful to them and appreciate their hospitality. My English is getting better. I already passed my citizenship test and became a Canadian citizen. I am very proud of that. I do not know how to express my gratefulness to them, as well as to those who have helped me to solve many problems during the past. All I want to say to them is "thank you."

The Better Beginnings, Better Futures Projects were based on a model of primary prevention and early intervention for young children. The Home Visitor program in this model was specifically developed by each of the neighbourhood sites to meet the needs of their communities. One of the strong policy directions in the Better Beginnings, Better Futures model was hiring culturally diverse staff who represented the language and culture of each host community. The result of this policy was the linking of new immigrant and refugee families to community supports where they live. In the Onward Willow Project, Home Visitors are selected based on their ability to do outreach in the community and meet new families with young children. Rather than focusing on education—although some of the Home Visitors have been professionals in their country of origin—the emphasis was placed on their knowledge of childhood development, difficulties families with young children experience, barriers faced by immigrant families, and their ability to empathize and be sensitive to the needs of the families. One of the most important skills needed by the culturally diverse Home Visitors is the ability to help new Canadian families build a social support network within their own communities which is sustainable over time. The Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project was based on

the premise that neighbourhood residents had the capacity to provide the outreach and support needed in their communities to make the projects successful in their attempt to better the life chances for young children and their families. The Home Visitors represent the community as they connect with families with young children from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The stories were translated by Ali Hong.

Susan Crouse graduated from the University of Guelph in December 1998 with a Master of Arts degree in Sociology. During the course of her studies, she has volunteered at the Onward Willow, Better Beginnings Better Futures project. Through her six-year involvement in the project she has sat on the Neighbourhood Leadership Group, the Management Board Leadership, The Human Resources Team, as well as a variety of other teams and commit-

tees. Through this work and her education, she has learned a great deal about the systemic barriers facing women, the poor, visible minorities, and those who do not speak English as their first language.

Ali Hoang came to Canada four years ago. She received her high school diploma in Canada and then went to a local business to participate in their job search program for new Canadians. She chose a job placement at Onward Willow. A year later she joined the "Friends Circle" at Onward Willow as a volunteer translator for one year. When the position for Receptionist and Family Support Worker became available, she applied for the job. It was part-time at first, but then became full-time when Family and Children's Service moved into the Family Gateway. Ali speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and English and provides translation services for many Asian immigrant people in the neighbourhood.



Toronto, Canada



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